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Decoys:

Illusion and Intrusion in the Act of Photography

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Decoys:

Illusion and Intrusion in the Act of Photography

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2011

Dedication

This report is dedicated to
my mother, Ninfa Yanas
and my father, Fred Yanas (deceased).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my graduate committee, Teresa Hubbard, Melissa Miller, Bogdan Perzynski, and Mike Smith for all their guidance over the last three years. I would also like to extend an extra special thanks to Mark Goodman and Troy Brauntuch for their constant support. I cannot forget Teresa Cervantes, for being my rock during the past few months.

May 2011

Abstract

Decoys:

Illusion and Intrusion in the Act of Photography

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Mark Goodman

This graduate report is a chronological assessment of the photographic work, which I have produced during my three years in the UT Studio Art MFA program.

I will highlight my use of photography as a mode to investigate both the physical and represented landscape. This mode has shifted focus since I first began the program. It has moved from a discourse engaging the fictional qualities of photographs, ever suggesting their tenuous relationship with the truth, to a more direct utilization of the power of a photograph as an actual document. Whatever the subject, my work is deeply rooted in a skepticism of media, structures and institutions. My camera acts as a probe to expose certain incongruities between the ways we view order and how that order is manifested.

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In Jacques Tati's film *Playtime* there is a scene where a bank official in a suit is searching for Monsieur Hulot (the main character, played by Tati) in the lobby of a distinctly modernist building made almost entirely of glass walls and stainless steel fixtures. This bank official believes he sees Hulot, who is distinguished by a fedora and a tan trench coat, walking out of the building. The man in the suit follows after him, immediately plowing his face into the glass wall. The man in the trench coat turns in reaction revealing himself not to be Monsieur Hulot.

Playtime is Tati's critique of modernist ordering of our lives. In his view, the apparent efficiency of modular structures and glass walls gives way to confusion and disorder; the wall is not a wall, Hulot is not Hulot. The order, in itself, is the cause of the confusion. Tati's film examines these ordered spaces with humor. He puts people in a structure and proceeds to find variations on their interactions with that structure. Humor, in a way, sets a pattern or assumption for the purpose of breaking it. From these breaks, we can attain a kind of clarity in the fracturing of a subject.

Like Hulot, I utilize humor and lightness (breaks in repetition, unreliable doubling) in order to make certain photographic truths evident. Like a wall in his fictionalized modern edifice, photography appears to be transparent but it is not; it is a flat representation with none of the space it depicts. Like the man in the trench coat, the subject appears to be Hulot, but is just a look-a-like.

Doubles or Hidden Likenesses (Figures 1-2)

"*Humor is grievance."*
-Marshall Mcluhan

When I entered the program, two and a half years ago, I had just left a part-time job at a local San Antonio grocery store. At this store there was a young man named Daniel Arevelo who I was often confused with and he for me. At first I was appalled by this notion, but it was a fact. His hair, his beard, his glasses were all very similar in proportion and coloring (he even had a mole on his cheek!). The feelings I had about this would be similar to those described by Roland Barthes in his *Camera Lucida*:

> For the photograph is the advent of myself as the other: a cunning disassociation of consciousness from the identity. Even odder: it was before Photography that men had the most to say about the vision of the double…Today it is as if we repressed the profound madness of photography: it reminds us of its mythic heritage only by that faint uneasiness which seizes me when I look at "myself" on a piece of paper. (p.12-13)

I wanted to address this actual double through the doubling process. I wanted to address the subject of myself through the "other." I asked the viewer, the camera, and myself, "Do we look alike?" Does his identity carry in some way a part of my own?

As a backdrop, I chose to use a common light blue bed sheet to evoke the tone of standardization, the sense of typology. I shot with a Pentax medium format film camera marketed for taking portraits. In the images, the heads are set in the center of the frame. The shallow depth of field connotes a certain gravity, or photographic validity. Only the camera can accurately produce this effect. We both wear black shirts. He is slightly more jovial in his expression. I appear stern. My face is slightly marred by some reddish blemishes around my nose. We both have thin beards. The choices I made are meant to entice a comparison, to notice things shared visually. He and I share parts of our self-image in a way. In a sense, this image is an acceptance of a loss of my aura, my individual image, but also a certification of that aura through precise individual details, which a photograph must record.

The images, juxtaposed, have a flat-footed feeling about them, amateurish and kind of funny. They are a simple clunky comparison; yet they yield a single image, which is completed by the gap, the cut, the break between them. This break would be the constant, the control of the work following, and a stylistic fixture that would permeate even now.

The Gap, Expanded (Figures 3-8)

So always standing in front of something the other
As words stand in front of objects, feelings, and ideas.

-Kenneth Koch, from “One Train May Hide Another”

During this time, a number of occurrences pushed the direction of my work. One of these occurrences was that I became enamored with a poem by Kenneth Koch entitled “One Train May Hide Another.” Influenced by the odd wording of a sign he saw at a train station in Kenya, Koch expanded on the theme of illusions and double-ness and how these, in their variations, can illuminate specific, yet opposing, truths about individual subjects.

Another occurrence was the arrival of an odd present I received in the mail from a friend in New York. It was an envelope that contained only two old small silver gelatin photographic prints, yellowed by time. One of the images depicted two women, one older with a cane attempting to climb up the slight incline of a rock or hill. Next to her was a younger women picking at her nails looking disinterested. In the background, there is an archway created by a rock and a ledge giving the illusion that the younger woman has a set of wings (this is merely a pictorial illusion created by figure/ground confusion). In the other image, the younger woman is gone and the old lady is now facing the camera smiling, supporting herself on the rock without her cane. On the back of these images someone wrote “Gold Canyon. Death Valley. April, 1948.” The temporal and spatial shift that took place in these photographs was poignant. In these images there was some narrative that was suggested but lacking a third image it could not be complete. They existed as two photographs and that is it;

their meaning together could only be defined through juxtaposition.

The diptych had also been appearing as a form of archiving in my landscape work I was producing at the time. I would shoot two images of one subject, changing the positioning or the exposure in the second image. I would come back to the lab and make small contact sheets with both of the images on one page.

These circumstances led me to create an archive of doubleness. I began to find images that were similar yet not the same in the old files on my hard drive, in publications, and at times made my own. Finding them and printing them and setting them within a physical space became like Koch's poem, a constant repetition on the variations of a theme. Each image gave way to another, each image brought to light some manifestation of seeing and a history of photographic genres.

Rosalind Krause, in her essay "*The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism*," wrote on the significance of photographic repetition and spacing to the early 19th Century Surrealists including references to an analysis of Max Ernst's work by French poet Louis Aragon:

> …and when Aragon wrote about the effect of the separate elements in Ernst's montages he compared them to "words." By this he refers not only to the transparency of each signifying element (by contrast with the opacity of the pieces of cubist collages), but also the experience of each element as a separate unit which, like a word, is conditioned by its placement within the syntagmatic chain of the sentence, is controlled by the condition of syntax…(105).

She goes on to speak of this space or gap being the defining element for meaning. It makes the viewer aware both of the two elements connected, but also their

"exteriority" of one another. In another passage, she defines this gap as the "formal precondition of the sign":

> The photographic image, thus "spaced," is deprived of one of the most powerful of photography's many illusions. It is robbed of a sense of presence. Photography's vaunted capture of a moment in time is the seizure and freezing of presence. It is the image of simultaneity, of the way that everything within a given space at a given moment is present to everything else; it is a declaration of the seamless integrity of the real. The photograph carries on one continuous surface the trace or imprint of all that vision captures in one glance. The photographic image is not only a trophy of this reality, but a document of its unity as that-which-was-present-at-one-time. But spacing destroys simultaneous presence; for it shows things sequentially, either one after another or external to one another—occupying separate cells. It is spacing that makes it clear--as it was to Heartfield, Tretyakov, Brecht, Aragon—that we are not looking at reality, but at the world infested by interpretation or signification, which is to say, reality distended by the gaps or blanks which are the formal preconditions of the sign (107).

The ever-expanding archive represented my own denial of photography's apparent "seamless integrity of the real."

This work came to a head with the creation of a large-scale diptych, which I created by using a found image from the Internet depicting a beached blue whale with a group of people standing around it. The original document, as presented to me via my screen, was a low-resolution snapshot of the event. I took the image and reworked it in Photoshop, erasing all the figures except one slouched man, with high-rise pants, and repositioned him in the left corner of the frame studying the large static mass. I made the horizon line horizontal with the top of the rectangular frame and increased its size dramatically. After doing this, I applied a filter in order to flatten the image into a unified surface, erasing a specific gesture that may have made

apparent actual process. Considering the size of the image, I spilt it in two and printed it as a large diptych. I included it with the archive that I had been producing, but in this case I made the gap unusually wide between the two sections. This made obvious the function of the gap as both a spatial and temporal separation, both of which prolonged the viewing experience, delaying the image's completion.

Apparitions/ Appropriations (Figures 9-14)

The image of the beached whale spring-boarded a series of large blurry images created through a similar collage technique. The most recent of this series, I produced for my 30-hour oral. Highly suggestive of narrative, the image consists of a car flipping on a highway; a police car seems to be following in the perceived background. Presented in a triptych structure, each section contains a tiny color bar at its lower center region. In a sense they bring to light how off the color in the image actually is; it is an awful pale green. The viewer is told to check the color. The bar acts as both a moment of reflection, a break from the action, built within the image, but also seems to sit on top of its soft surface. The color bar, which in printing refers to the process of defining correct color, could also be read as a reference to stained glass windows, complementing the sacred aspects of the triptych structure. But these small moments are literally diminished by the spectacular image.

This series of images seem at first to be simply large blown up documents

taken from the Internet, but they are, in fact, the product of collage. Given the technique of flattening involved, the actions of its process disappear behind a guise of immediate distortion. They seem to be absent of both a context and a photographer. They are, like the car, floating in a fixed weightlessness, which is a definitive element of the medium.

In another series of images entitled "Levitations," I photographed rocks suspended in mid-air. I produced these shots by setting my digital camera at a high shutter speed with a low depth-of-field, and continuously throwing some modestly sized rocks in the air. The rocks appear to be frozen in an anonymous western horizon. Since the rocks' proximity to the camera is unclear, their exact size is unreadable.[1] The direct light of the mid-afternoon sun has a flattening effect on the image making the rocks appear as if they were digitally planted in the frame. I printed these images at a modest size and arranged them in triptychs, grids, and crosses, suggesting a type of absolute reading. These static, historically heavy structures rub against their light and loose subject matter calling into question both the ambiguous process of image making while simultaneously glorifying it.

Roland Barthes states, "I feel that the photograph creates my body or mortifies it (11)." In this statement he places the unique significance of mortification on photography. It stops motion, sets things to rest. It is not surprising that cultures outside of civilization would be so frightened by its stillness. This stillness is in a

sense a fallacy, an illusion that is a break from the constantly undulating natural world. These large-scale photo-collages and flying rocks bring with them an obsession with death and permanence that marks many western religions, which like traditional photographic practices are defined by a fixed position, which like photography attempt to bring order to things. The structure of these images, again, puts this truth of the document and the presence of the photographer, into a blurry state.

Decoy (Figures 15-17)

In the spring of 2010, I made a solid urethane rubber sculpture which made reference to Robert Morris's "Slab (cloud)"(1973), Rachel Whiteread 's "Untitled (Double Amber Bed)"(1991) and Bruce Nauman's "Six Inches of My Knee Extended to Six Feet"(1967). The pink, purple, and blue Phallus like, rectilinear form is a self-portrait measuring exactly my height. Its structure was well defined before the casting, but the color was mostly circumstantial, based on what pigments I had on hand.

Titled "Decoy," this object was produced for a slapstick effect. The user picks it up or drops it or does anything with it. The object is wobbly and unstable when not laid on the ground. In an experiment, I produced a suite of images using the

[1] Many viewers assume that the rocks are larger, something like bolders.

object to imitate performance art photographs from the late sixties and seventies, tourist photos, portrait photography, product shots, etc. In one image I shot the object on black and white film, made a small 8 x10 inch print, scanned it, and digitally planted it within another scan I made of a group of Man Ray images from a book. I then made a print of the embedded image. All the photographs were an attempt at a photographic mimicry.

In the presentation of this work I quoted Ed Ruscha: "I was more influenced by representations of paintings in magazines than I was standing in front of the magnificent thing itself." I wanted to explore this notion of representation. I wanted to imitate all of the ways this object could "look" and if that would define what it was.

The object and the photographs nullified one another. The object devoid of any particular context, besides its clear reference to minimalism and post minimalism, was only engaging when activated by a user. Left latent on the ground, its effect was lost, one could not tell its malleability less they consider the images it was presented with, but these were almost too clear in their intentions.

This project revealed my own fascination with the body. The solid pillar of rubber was only interesting when acted upon by another body. The ability to change its character and context required force, movement, and control. The notion of self-portraiture also came to the forefront as a useful tool in investigating the photograph's ability to mediate our interaction with each other and our environment.

To Capture is to Put to Rest (Figures 18-20)

Place the bodies in a little world of signals to each of which is attached a single, obligatory response: it is a technique of training, of dressage…(166)

-Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*

While visiting El Paso, Texas with my girlfriend, Teresa Cervantes, I decided to take a picture of the Cordova Bridge, which links the city to Juarez, notorious for its violent political terrain. I set up my 4x5 camera in the Chamizal National Memorial, which is adjacent to the bridge and began to shoot. Teresa, who was joined by her family on this particular expedition watched from a distance.

The 4x5 camera requires time and a tripod to operate (there are many knobs and levers to adjust and lock before an exposure can be made), but it yields a large, highly detailed negative that can later be scanned to create a large, high resolution image. I messed up my first exposure, corrected my error, and took another. I then carried my film cartridge to where Teresa was standing and grabbed another set of unexposed film. I returned to my camera and moved to get another angle on the bridge and the buildings connected to it. At this moment three border agents approached me inquiring who I was and what were my motives. "Is this digital?" one of the officers asked. They told me that it was illegal to take pictures of the Federal building connected to the bridge, or of any Federal Building. I did not know this; no

sign was posted. They said they needed to take my negative. I told them I only shot one but conceded. I went to retrieve it from Teresa and grabbed an unexposed set, returned to the officers apologetically and destroyed the unused negatives. During the duration of these actions, Teresa, unbeknownst to me, had been photographing from the distance with a digital camera. When I returned to Austin, I scanned the undisclosed negative, downloaded the digital images and made two large prints presented as a diptych. Together they offered a dialogue between two still photographs about the nature of image capture and its imposed limitations in the landscape.

The power the officers exerted over me, the fear I felt, and the photography this institution was threatened by, were pertinent subjects. I bumped into an invisible wall, one that is kept invisible to enhance a state of anxiety in the curious. To define this wall, which is built upon relationships of individuals with the architecture and signs that inhabit this particular space became a reason to recreate the circumstances that yielded the initial diptych, but with different subjects in different spaces.

The process involves two shooters, or photographers: Me with my 4x5 Toyo field camera, another person with a point-and-shoot digital camera (preferably small and inconspicuous). I choose the subject based on a feeling. Certain spaces evoke apprehension at the thought of capturing their image (i.e. a bank, an airport, private residences, any federal facility, etc.). I then approach the institution, camera on tripod, set up my shot and move around it. The second shooter is given very little

instruction, except to stay out of sight (more or less) and if anything happens, to take the image; I am their subject and he or she must move around me.

In an environment of coded signs (i.e. yellow barricades, stop signs, drive-thrus, officers with guns) that we are accustomed to abiding without question, my camera acts as an oppositional sign to the flow of bodies through these spaces, a threat of photographic arrest. Even if there is nothing, per se, to capture, the large clunky camera symbolizes a threat to the people and the institutions they inhabit. There is paranoia involved, and in certain situations and places, I am the antagonist. This paranoia, and the structures that both illustrate and define it, is an important aspect to the project. But sometimes nobody approaches me and nobody inquires about my motives. In this sense, I am acting as a probe—testing the subject to see how it reacts. I note the circumstances, change location or return.

In a sense, these diptychs are documents of a performance. There is a long history of transgressive artistic acts. David Hammons' "Pissed Off" (1981) is a work in which the artist urinated on a Richard Serra monumental sculpture in downtown Manhattan and received a ticket from a police officer. A friend of Hammons photographed the process; the action was the artwork, the photograph was the proof of that action. In the case of my work, the second camera is making a record of both the results of my posturing with the 4x5 camera in a charged space and the cameraperson's attempt to get the ideal image of the interaction, if it occurs. These movements and decisions, their successes and failures are half of the performance.

My camera, the dummy, is a mode by which to create a situation and a play of gazes to be recorded.

In another sense, the end product of my efforts is a consideration of photography, its history, mechanisms and stylistic projections. Not merely the need to record a subject but to create ideas through its aestheticiziation. In a body of experimental work, the early 20th century photographer, Paul Strand, rigged a false lens on his camera and made images of people looking at him photographing them. These images were not just documents of a preconceived action but also an observation of the manner in which people react to the camera's presence.

My prints represent an aesthetic consideration of a place and an observation of the manners that result from that apparent consideration. Putting them together creates a tension. The two images contain a conflicting ideology in their methods of production. One is slow to make and represents maximum clarity where the other represents the immediate, surveillance-like image--digitally chunky, poorly printed, made on the fly with very little formal consideration. One camera represents the need to capture one thing; the other suggests a need to capture everything. One is the ruse to produce the other. Like Strand, I am using deception to reveal a truth.

The truth that is revealing itself through these images is one of distrust and it's expression in spaces through architecture. Our government does not trust the brown skinned individual moving in and out of its southern borders nor the citizen with the

right to capture its apparent activities; this is represented through its officers' prescribed actions and the structure of its system.

Recently, I traveled back to El Paso to photograph another bridge, the Paseo del Norte, located downtown. Approaching the crossing from a side entrance, I was corralled by a maze of chain-linked fences, which offer mediated views of the processing activities of the checkpoint facilities. I stopped at the entrance to the main walkway going into Juarez. I leveled my camera and took a few exposures of the immense drive-through guiding cars slowly into El Paso. Teresa was only about 20 feet behind me with the digital camera. Sure enough, an officer approached me stating that I could not photograph "here." Again, there was no sign forbidding photography. He said I had to delete my file; only the press could take photos, but that I should talk to the supervisor first. Teresa, who was stifled at the time by her own implication in this situation, only took one shaky image. I talked to the supervisor. She said that I could shoot, but only across the street in the opposite direction of the facility. Seeing a certain humor in this offer, I took the picture.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4


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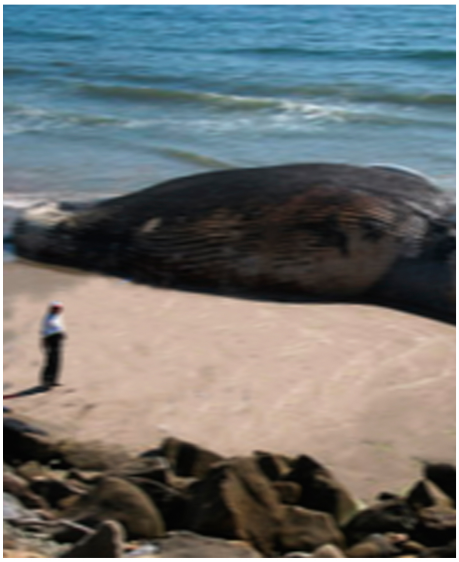
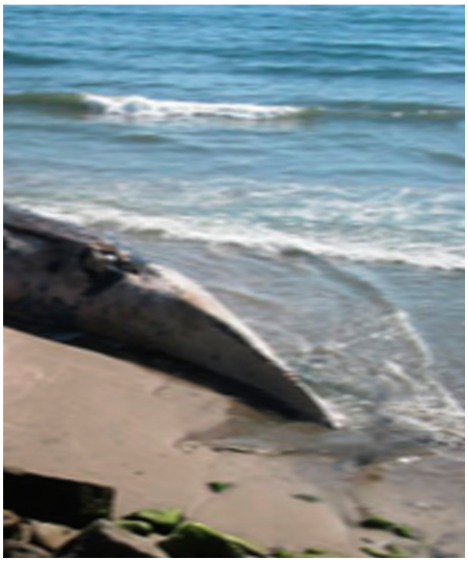
SURVEILLANCE
800 310-5535
LIVE MOBILE VIDEO
SURVEILLANCE
800 310-5535

Figure 5


ecamsecure.com
LIVE MOBILE VIDEO
SURVEILLANCE
wireless remote management
800 310-5535
Figure 6





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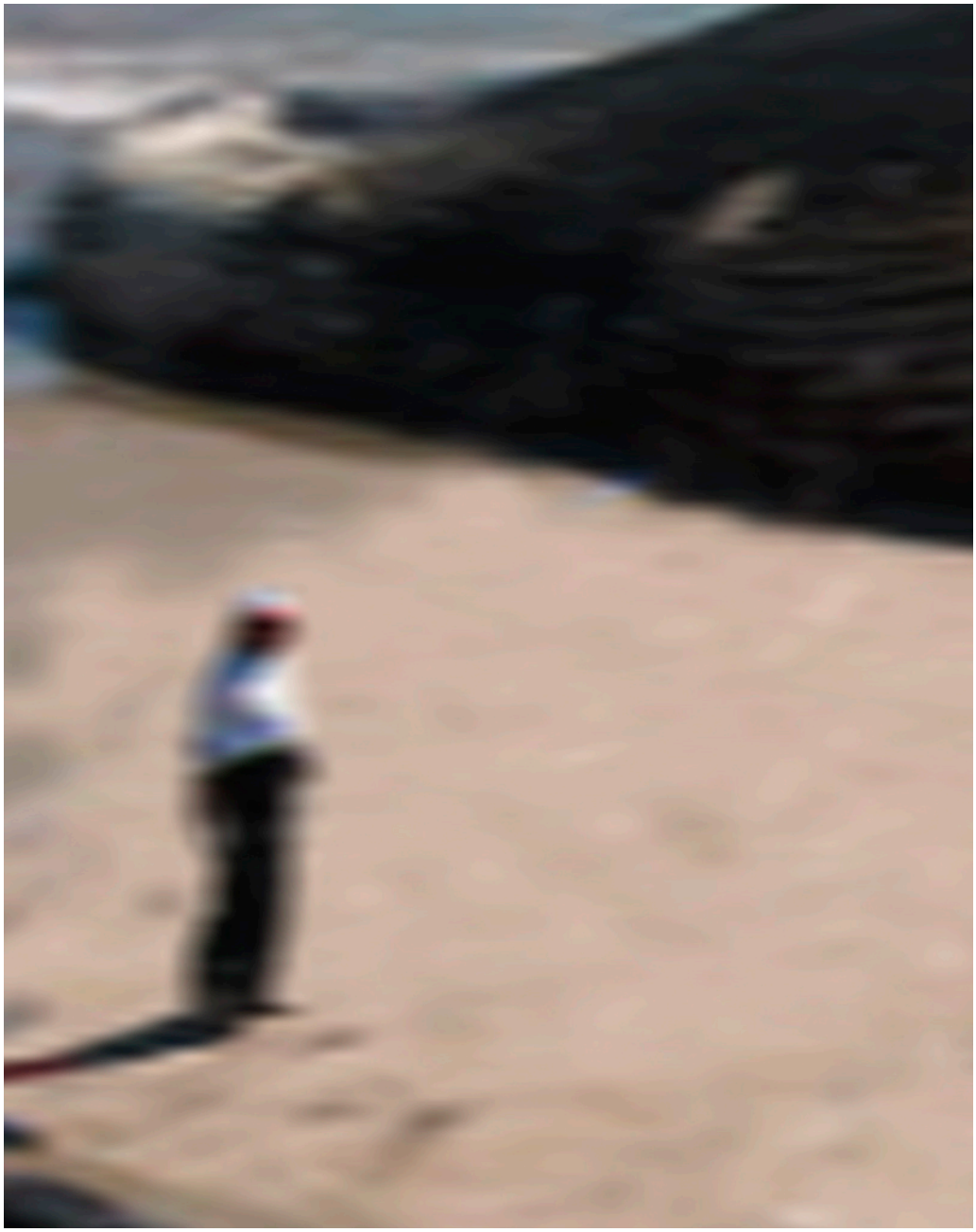


Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

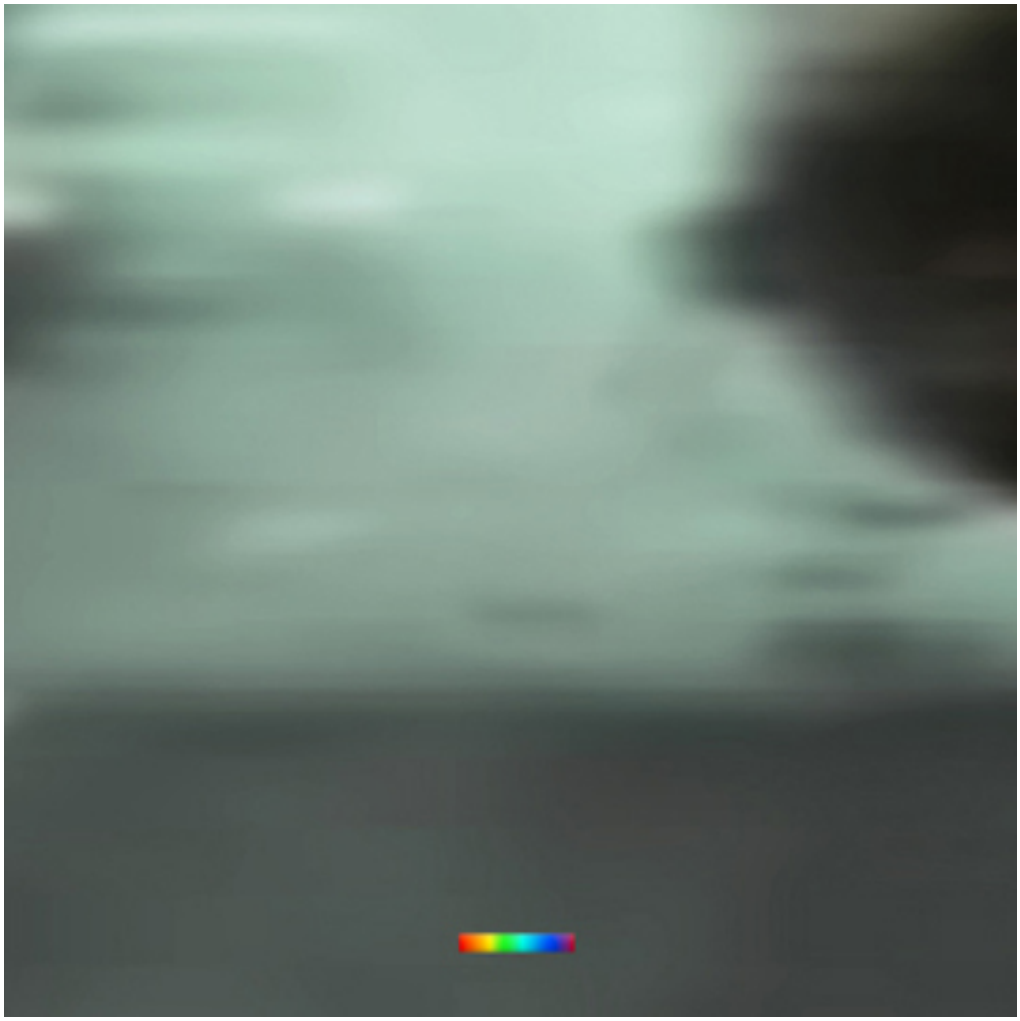
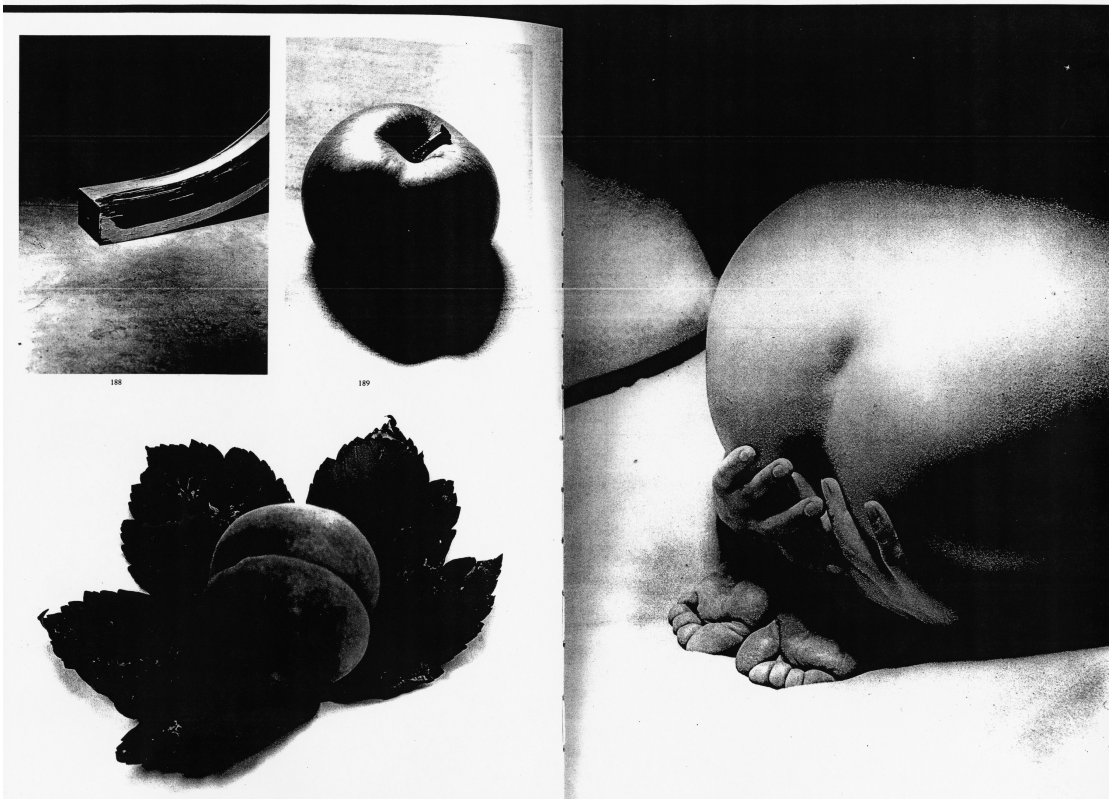


Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figure 14



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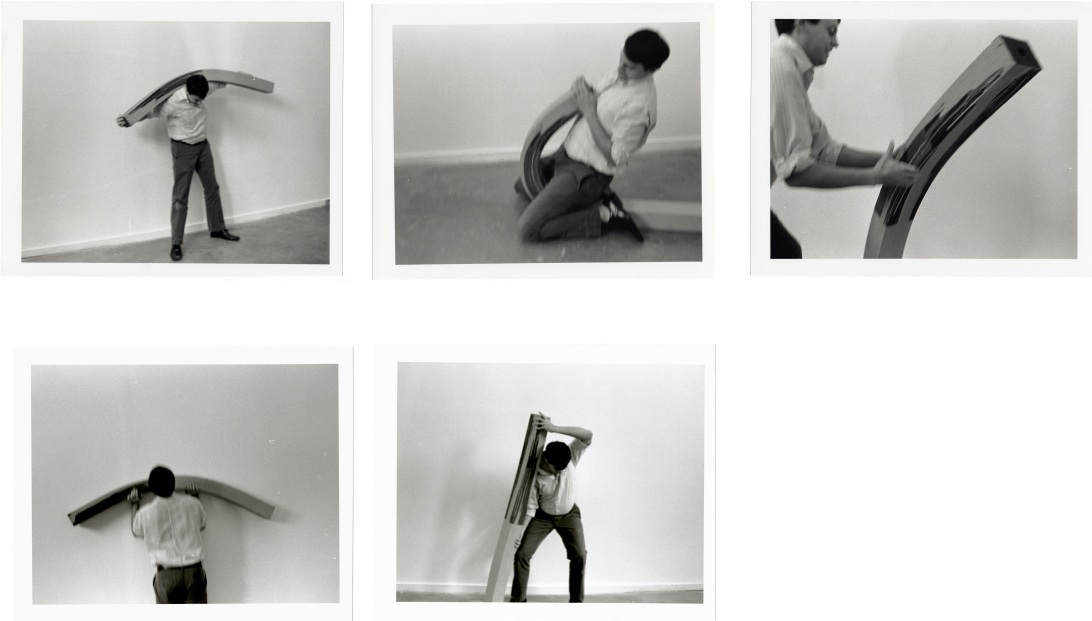

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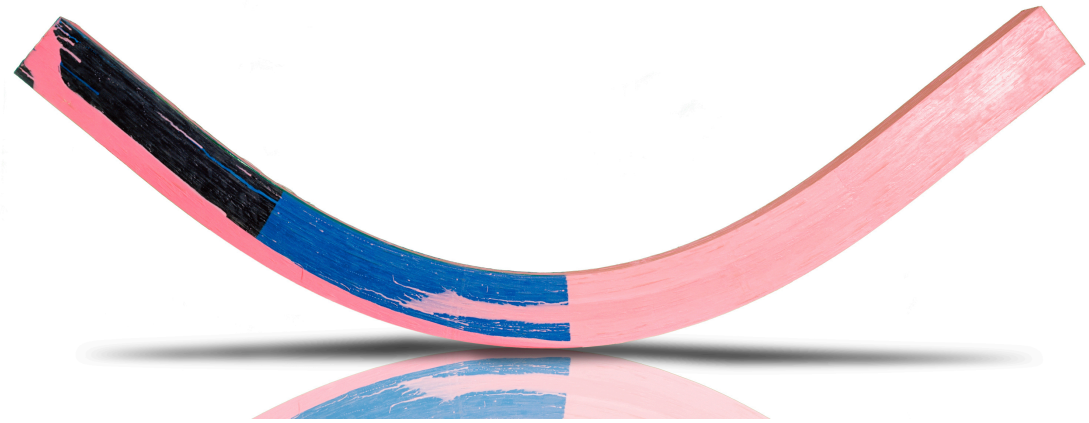

Figure 17

Figure 18

Figure 19

Figure 20

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Vita

Richard Yanas was born in San Antonio, Texas in 1984, the son of Fred and Ninfa Yanas. After graduating from Central Catholic High School, he attended the University of Texas at San Antonio, graduating with a B.F.A. with a concentration in photography in 2006. In 2008, he began the M.F.A. program in Studio Art at the University of Texas at Austin.

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